

TEACHING CULTURE WITH GRAFFITI

Whether one considers graffiti to be vandalism or art, they are authentic manifestations of contemporary language and culture. In the language classroom their “rebellious” nature piques student interest and allows an introduction to learning to observe and analyze a culture. Using the AATF framework *Acquiring Cross-cultural Competence: Four Stages for Students of French* (NTC, 1996), we find that certain graffiti can be useful at the different levels of competence as laid out in that document (page 14). Here are some examples for Stage I.

Stage I learners (who may or may not be first-year language learners) are asked to be able “to identify some commonly-held images of the target culture as stereotypes.” Graffiti in the form of stencils (*le pochoir*) lend themselves admirably to a discussion of such stereotypes and can lead to a debunking of those which do not hold up under scrutiny.



Fig. 1: Stereotype: “With beret and baguette, the typical Frenchman is white.”

To help students past this stereotype (Fig. 1), a very useful tool is any photograph of the 1998 French national soccer team (see the cover of *France Football*, 14 juillet; the front and back pages of *Libération*, 13 juillet; or any of the news magazines from the week of July 13). The multi-cultural and multi-ethnic makeup of the championship team (and they really did win through teamwork) make this a delightful way to step beyond the stereotypical image of the “*Français moyen*.”

Using this stereotype (Fig. 2), which is one that commonly comes up when students are asked to describe the French, the teacher can ask students to confirm the stereotype by working through examples of other instances in French culture where types of love come to the fore. Film, litera-



Fig. 2: Stereotype: “The French are obsessed with love and sex.”

ture (the chivalric tradition), and even the perception of the human body are topics that can clarify the French value “*l’amour*” (see *Acquiring Cross-cultural Competence*, page 27, for a more detailed discussion of love as a value).

Yes, the French are notoriously *raleurs* (Fig. 3). Again, this is an opportunity to discuss other manifestations of this characteristic (demonstrations and strikes) and to have students think through the underlying reasons for such behavior. *L’Etat*, *la protection sociale*, and *la méfiance* are concepts that can be developed to help students see that the behavior fits into a cultural



Fig. 3: Stereotype: “The French are always criticizing something or complaining.”

Graffiti are also a rich resource for Stages II and above with other activities that guide students to see a broader picture of French culture than may be presented in textbooks. It is hoped that these few examples can serve as models for teachers who have graffiti among their slide collections; and for those who don’t, *Graffiti’Art*

by Eric de Ara Gamazo (Éditions de l’Aube), *French Graffiti* by Imbach and Grindard (Éditions du Guépard), and *Paris: Art libre dans la ville* by Yvan Tessier (Herscher) can provide ample materials.

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