

IF THE WORLD SPEAKS FRENCH, THEN IT MUST BE... THE LANGUAGE OF THE STARS

Why are we such stargazers? Is our knowledge of celebrity lives a form of status enhancement in the wake of generally low self-esteem and lackluster existences? We Americans do like to pause in admiration of those who are “busy being fabulous,” the stars, the “celebs,” whose stories make them seem larger than life, the passionate topic of endless watercooler chatter. Perhaps we are simply in awe of those who gambled and won in the arena of fame. After all, they are not really like us... or are they? One thing a number of them do that we also can learn to do is speak French.

The Language of the Stars [www.utm.edu/staff/globeg/celebfrench.shtml] is an advocacy Web page that provides information about French-speaking sports, film, TV, music and other celebrities whose legends and images are familiar to us, many of whom are American, some foreign residents, and some, just plain famous. All of them speak French, and in many cases, we present them doing just that through video. In addition, there are hundreds of researchable references to French speakers of world-class fame, derived from great works of art, music, literature, history and ground-breaking scientific achievement, but who are not presented in video recordings.

If you scoff at the idea that students might be turned on to French because Sarah Chalke, Johnny Depp, Vanessa Branch, Lucas Grabeel, Daniel Radcliffe, Kevin Kline, Oliver Stone, Jamie Bamber, Kristin Scott Thomas, Emma Watson, Joakim Noah, and many others are on video speaking French, get over your snobbishness now. These stars are not extraterrestrial changelings on the cover of *The National Inquirer*, the bedraggled victims of an unwanted paparazzi encounter. They are just part of the answer to the question all our students ask: “Who speaks French, anyway?” Yes, we know that French is widely spoken by 200 million people in over 50 countries and is an official language of many international organizations. However, with so much news coverage of China’s economic growth, and because an increasing number of our neighbors speak Spanish, we need to connect some faces, facts, and voices to our French-speakers.

No matter what we may pretend, we are dying to hear if the children of Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie are beginning to speak French as they roam the grounds of *Château Miraval* in the Var. We laugh as Phoebe tried to teach French to Joey on the American sitcom, *Friends*. We listen intently to a French interview or the hip-hop song, “Balance-toi” of NBA All-star and tournament

MVP, Tony Parker, knowing that his new high-profile actress bride, Eva Longoria, has studied and speaks French. We note the serious analytic spirit of Jodie Foster, as she talks fluently about her recent film, *The Brave One* (À vif) in a French interview. If we are gamers, we are fascinated by “Sims Online” and “Metal Gear Solid 4” producer, Jade Raymond, and we watch in awe as she gives an illustrated interview about her popular game, “Assassin’s Creed.” Of course, we all want to be rock stars, or at least hang out with them. What about the successful pop and rock singers and groups like Sarah Bettens, Tokio Hotel, Chris Martin of Coldplay, Bruce Dickenson of Iron Maiden, Mick Jagger, Carole Fredericks, Céline Dion, and Zachary Richard? We see and hear them all on video singing or speaking French?

So, what can you do that carries something besides a shallow “gee-whiz” value? Activities might include the following. Students rank and identify celebrities in a group by how fluent they sound. The teacher divides the class into groups, writes descriptive sentences about five famous French speakers from the web page, without naming them. The student groups compete to see which one accurately identifies the French speakers first. Each of the same groups are given the identities of three different famous or celebrity French speakers from the Web site. They collectively write descriptive sentences for each one, and pass their three descriptions on to the next group to see if that group can successfully identify these celebs through the descriptive sentences. Students can play “Who am I?” with names drawn from a pool of celebrities known to all and announced the day before. The idea is that students with name labels on their backs try to guess their celebrity identity. There are two ways this might be done. In the first, students without labels on their backs are each given a different fact in French about the person whose name is on the label. Each time a student with a label on his or her back asks: “Qui suis-je?” the student asked simply reads the fact aloud. The idea is to count how many facts have to be given out before the student with the label can guess his or her identity correctly. The other way is for the students to break up into groups. Students with labels bearing the name of a famous French speakers or celebrities, ask yes/no questions in French to their respective groups. They must ask at least five questions before they are allowed to take their guess, five before the second guess, etc. The group with the best average of quick guesses wins. Another ac-

tivity is to get students to write short French biographies about the celebrities. How about this one? Have students explain in French the circumstances where each star is speaking French on video. Using the “Groups of famous French speakers” section, have students match names against disciplines, professions and trades, or vice versa, in groups selected by the teacher. Using this same section, have students write four or five questions each for a hypothetical interview with a famous French speaker of their choice. Using this section again, have students pair a famous American or Anglophone with a famous French speaker in the lists. In each case, students must state in French what makes the two similar. Judge the student responses on how detailed the parallels are. Ask students to explain in French which star or famous French speaker is their favorite and why. But wait; there’s more. The web page introduction includes a link to an extensive list of activities using famous French speakers.

With 45.5 million Hispanics, and an increasing number who are bilingual and monolingual in Spanish, with 15.2 million Asian immigrants or those of Asian decent living in the U.S.,* it is more and more likely that we will hear this question from both students and parents: “So who in the world speaks French?” A simple geographical answer goes in one ear and out the other for people whose geography is the neighborhood and the room where they watch TV. On the other hand, Americans seem to always know and care about what celebrities do. After your students “ooh and ah” about the stars on this web site, you can get out maps and show them where 200 million more French speakers live.

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*US Census Bureau News Release (May 1, 2008) www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/population/011910.html