

FREN 111- Inquiry

In society, language serves as a barrier separating two or more cultures. When my family and I went to Paris for the first time a few years ago, the first problem that we encountered as we were trying to leave the airport was that we had no way to get to our hotel. We must have gone out the wrong door, because only one woman was standing at the same spot as us. My mom asked her how we could call a taxi, and she just smiled and nodded. Luckily, since my sister and I had studied French in high school, we were able to ask her in French to call a taxi. She responded, in perfect English, that she'd be more than happy to help us. While annoying at first, we quickly realized that she was trying to prove a point: that we wouldn't survive in France without being able to communicate.

After spending a week in Paris, I understood more of what that woman was trying to prove. It wasn't only the language that separated us (I even built the confidence to strike up a conversation with one of our taxi drivers towards the end of the trip), but the entire culture seemed to be different. Every night we stuck to having dinner on Les Champs Élysées, a main street and frankly a tourist trap, except for one when we tried local fondue. Needless to say, it was the best meal of the trip. Knowing how to navigate specific aspects of a culture is crucial to understanding it as a whole. My experience in Paris led me to pursue my study of French even more; I was planning on only studying the language to fill the requirement, however experiencing the culture first-hand made me realize how important it is to understand what lays under the skin of other foreign communities. Understanding the language isn't nearly enough to understand the culture as a whole. That's where French 111 began to take part.

Not only did we continue studying the language in this class, but we were also exposed to many aspects of French culture. During the first or second meeting of the semester we sat down at the computers and watched a video and read an article about pop art in Paris. Immediately, we were exposed to more than just language. This assignment tested our reading and listening comprehension as well as teach us about an aspect of modern culture. We did many activities like this, including reading the news in French and studying French current events, including politics.

Most recently, the assignment that exposed me most to French culture was our Historic Figures project. While I extensively studied one specific character essential in French history and write a chapter of a book on them, I was also able to read others' chapters and learn about other important figures, such as Napoléon, Vercingetorix, and Toussant L'Overture. While these people are important in world culture, learning about them from a French perspective opened my eyes to how important they really are to other parts of the world.

The most important part of this course that contributed to my understanding of French culture was our "Je lis" sections on our portfolio. Once a week (on average), we were to read and write about something we found interesting. This required us to research and really understand what we are talking about. Such a simple task had major effects on me and really showed me how the study of this language was more than a way to communicate with others, but really served as a gateway to relating to others on a more personal level. Since my "Je lis" posts were mostly focused on current events and pop culture, I feel almost at an advantage to considering myself a participant in the global conversation.

Because of my study of French, I listen to music in French much more frequently and, oddly enough, find myself thinking to myself in French occasionally. I know now that, with my continued and improved study of both the French language and French culture, the next time I find myself in France I will have no problem talking to others in French. My conversation with that taxi driver those years ago was just about my experience in Paris and how I was enjoying the city, a conversation mostly driven by him once he realized that I spoke a small bit of French. However now I feel like I could go back and hold a full conversation about this year's election, or how the French National Soccer Team is doing, or Stromae's latest album. While my accent isn't as polished as I'd like, I know for a fact that even though I am American, nothing can stop me from communicating with someone from another culture on a personal level.