



## **World Languages in High School: The Freedom to Discover the World (A Practical Example in the French Class)**

**Elena Martí Alonso**

American School of Valencia, Spain

### **Abstract**

*There is a general unanimity in the need to make learners demonstrate an intercultural communicative competence. Interculturality as a pedagogical approach aims to enable learners to get out of a unique vision of culture and to accept cultural plurality. In some way, the cultural proposals of the school programs often limit the real possibilities of language classes. Why not use the new language as a tool to discover and understand the world around us without further borders? Learning a new language includes the knowledge of the language system as a tool to communicate, but also the ability to express people's cultural thoughts and beliefs. Therefore, it is also a way to understand how the speakers of the target language see the world and to open our minds. Planning the language lessons without limitations of cultural contents allows the students to discover, compare, analyze and reflect on a large variety of topics from a wider cultural context, to make connections between previous and new knowledge, to choose topics for research and at the same time, provides teachers and students with multiple possibilities for practice, assessment and specially for differentiation. The practical example proposed in this paper aims to demonstrate how a simple proverb in the French class ("La plume est plus forte que l'épée.") becomes the conductive thread among multiple topics related to Art, Literature, History and real news, offers learning experiences in writing, listening, speaking and reading, interconnects contents of other subjects and increases substantially the student's motivation. As a result, the vocabulary, the topics, the opportunities of reflection, comparison and interaction as well as the activities carried out by the students covering all areas of the language, become much more enriching and meaningful than limiting the contents to a series of topics. World languages represent the perfect tool to make connections and, linking the classes to real life makes students take an active part in learning that goes far beyond the language itself, offering them a better understanding of the world.*

**Keywords:** *cultural plurality, borders, perceptions, differentiation.*

### **1. Introduction**

World Language teachers have a "magic wand" that opens a window to the real world, they show and teach a way of communicating experiences and thoughts through different words. It is magic because the more tools we have to express ourselves, the freer we feel and the best we can understand others. There are no limits to how many words we can learn in the target language or how well we can use them. New words and new structures immediately connect to our previous knowledge and create an ingenious spider web through similarities and differences. Students unconsciously research language connections through their own interests and for many of them the school programs seem limiting and therefore frustrating. In addition, language teachers face diversified groups of students in terms of skills, interests, cultural backgrounds and experience in learning languages. So, how can we make the lessons and tasks meaningful for all of them? There is not an easy answer to this question but students react more positively when they have the freedom to choose a path that is appropriate and challenging enough for each of them. They need a variety of choices and opportunities to show their capabilities and improvements. The classroom is a representation of society and language teachers are asking the students to open their minds to a global and multicultural world; consequently, they need to experience it inside the classroom, feeling that they are unique in a diversified group of learners.



## 2. A practical experience in the French class

### 2.1 Context

The American School of Valencia is an international school with a multicultural student population. More than a goal, interculturality is a daily reality so that the topics presented in class are naturally interpreted differently.

The lesson was designed for a group of tenth grade students with a B1 general level of French, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). It is an intermediate level where a language learner can

- Understand points regarding family, work, school or leisure-related topics.
- Deal with most travel situations in areas where the language is spoken.
- Create simple texts on topics of personal interest.
- Describe experiences, events, dreams, and ambitions, as well as opinions or plans in brief.

Although some audio-visual documents may occasionally be used in other languages because of the interest of the message, French is the only language used in the classroom to communicate and participate in oral and written activities

The main goal of this lesson was to experience how students would react with authentic documents and make them reflect and enrich the lesson with their own proposals. The use of technology plays an important role to introduce the learners to different forms of media so that they can become familiar with the sound of the target language and its variations through French speakers and listen or watch news in real time. The classrooms are provided with interactive whiteboards and the students have access to computers, therefore, students are used to these frequent connections to real world (pictures, videos, video clips, articles, news, etc.) and to quickly share any kind of information with the rest of the group.

### 2.2 General brainstorming

The learning goal of this lesson was to make the students understand the importance of freedom of speech as a fundamental right and how this right can be visible (or not) in our daily life.

The idea of starting the lesson from the quote *“La plume est plus forte que l’épée.”* (*“The pen is mightier than the sword.”*) came from the title of the first unit of a French B2 student book from Didier/Santillana (*Génération Lycée 3*). Starting the lesson with this quote made the students reflect about the meaning of the quote and how this freedom of speech can be visible through not only words but also through art.



 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quel est le sens de ce proverbe?</li> <li>• Remplacez <b>“la plume”</b> et <b>“l’épée”</b> par d’autres mots sans changer le sens du proverbe.</li> </ul>	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Est-ce qu'on peut aussi dénoncer des inégalités ou des injustices à travers l'art?</li> <li>• Cherchez des exemples.</li> </ul>
Réflexions sur l'écriture (EO)	Réflexions sur l'écriture (EO)

Fig.1 Brainstorming

*First brainstorming: What is the meaning of the proverb? / Replace “the pen” and “the sword” by other words without changing the meaning of the proverb. / Is it possible to react against inequalities or injustice through art? Find examples.*

During the activity, students named writers, journalists, artists and also singers of different nationalities.

### 2.3 Reflecting about Art

The second step was to deepen into the topic through pictures analysis: art street, comics/cartoons, classic and modern art, sculptures, advertisements... (Fig.2)



Fig.2 The freedom of speech through Art

Students were able to identify some of these pictures and make connections with their previous knowledge so that other subtopics came out through the references of these images: terrorism, war, environment, consumerism, feminism, weapons, violence, stereotypes. From this, it was easy to introduce some names such as Charlie Hebdo, *Corto Maltese* by Hugo Pratt, *Guernica* by Picasso, *La liberté Guidant le peuple* by E. Delacroix (versus one of the multiples versions made by some cartoonists after the terrorist attack to Charlie Hebdo), even the philosopher Descartes with the allusion to his sentence *I think, therefore I am* versus *I shop, therefore I am*.

At this point, students were confident, focused on content more than in language accuracy, which increased motivation and participation in a visibly way. Again, they added some names referred to street art like Banksy, they talked about some of his famous drawings, and also talked about street art in Valencia. Even Escif, one of the best-known artists of urban art in Valencia, was also introduced.

## 2.4 Reflecting about Music

The analysis of images through videos was introduced with the video clip *Roméo kiffe Juliette*, (Romeo loves Juliet) from Fabien Marsaud<sup>1</sup>, a French slam poet, better known by his stage name Grand Corps Malade (GCM). This slam is a new version of the classic Shakespeare's tragedy, taking place in France, where Romeo is Muslim and Juliet is Jewish, and where racial and religious conflicts emerge. Students were then asked to describe the video-clip orally, and, in groups, to answer some questions in writing about the lyrics (Fig.3) and to compare both versions of the story, with a more hopeful message in the new version, where the characters decide to live their love in spite of adversity and the opposition of their parents.



### BIOGRAPHIE

<http://www.grandcorpsmalade-fan.net/bio.php>

<http://www.nrf.fr/artistes/grand-corpsmalade/biographie>

### QUESTIONS



1. Quels sont les noms des personnages? Quel est leur âge? Où habitent-ils?
2. Pourquoi se voient-ils en cachette? Expliquez les raisons.
3. Qui les découvrent et comment?
4. Quelles en sont les conséquences?
5. À quoi fait référence *Mercutio et la fiole de cyanure*?
6. Est-ce que la fin de l'histoire de ces deux jeunes est la même que celle de la tragédie de Shakespeare?

Roméo et Juliette par Shakespeare: <http://www.histoire-amour.com/romeo-juliette.html>

Fig.3 The freedom of speech through Music

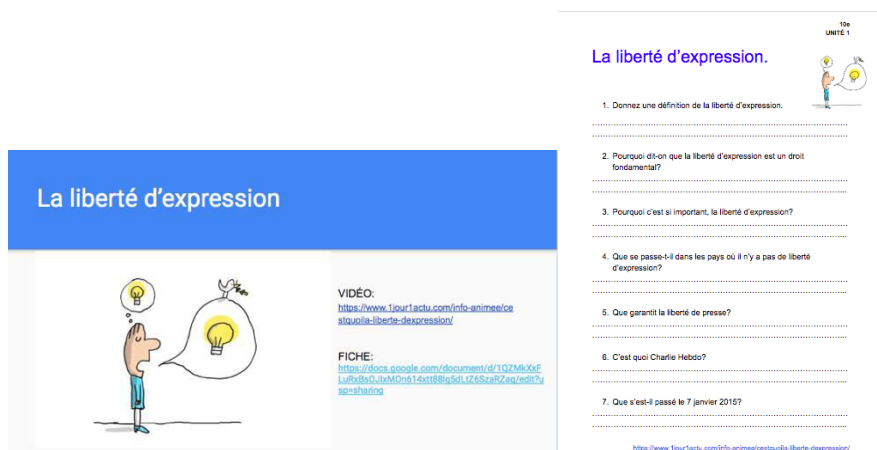
This social criticism through music resulted in a brainstorming of singers and music styles from different backgrounds. A short biography of GCM was told to the students: a diving accident on his 20th birthday left him disabled. The level of engagement of the group increased considerably and reacted with solidarity towards the young characters and the urban poet. Then, we came back to the idea that the freedom of speech is a fundamental right which led us to the following part.

## 2.5 Reflecting about the freedom of speech

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RcxRMikZrbY>



After the brainstorming and reflection sessions, students were asked to listen to a short explanation of the freedom of speech by *1Jour 1Actu*, a free French educational website<sup>2</sup> and they had to answer some general questions in complete sentences. (Fig.4)



**La liberté d'expression**

10e  
UNITE 1

**La liberté d'expression.**

1. Donnez une définition de la liberté d'expression.
2. Pourquoi dit-on que la liberté d'expression est un droit fondamental?
3. Pourquoi c'est si important, la liberté d'expression?
4. Que se passe-t-il dans les pays où il n'y a pas de liberté d'expression?
5. Que garantit la liberté de presse?
6. C'est quoi Charlie Hebdo?
7. Que s'est-il passé le 7 janvier 2015?

VIDÉO:  
<https://www.1jour1actu.com/info-animee/cestquoila-liberte-dexpression/>

FICHE:  
<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Q2MkXcF-Lu8d0pD-nM0m1-4am0Bm5Uj20SzaxE7Zew/preview?searching>

<https://www.1jour1actu.com/info-animee/cestquoila-liberte-dexpression/>

Fig.4 Listening comprehension activity

Now that they had some information about the freedom of speech as a fundamental right and one of the pillars of a democratic society, students were asked to imagine their lives without that right. (Fig.5) They thought of some historical moments that they studied and imagined life under Spanish dictatorship or under Nazism. Some films were mentioned like *Au revoir les enfants*, that they watched in the French class the previous year, *Schindler's List*, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* based on the novel by John Boyne and *The Book Thief* based on the novel by the Australian writer Markus Zusak. The students who knew the last book or film mentioned talked about it and we watched the trailer of the film to analyse the images.



Et si on nous interdisait de lire/voir/dire librement ce qu'on veut?

**CENSURE**

Avez-vous entendu parler de *La voleuse de livres*?

*La voleuse de livres* (*The Book Thief*) est un roman de l'écrivain australien Markus Zusak

Fig.5 TRAILER: [http://www.allocine.fr/video/player\\_gen\\_cmedia=19539113&cfilm=204237.html](http://www.allocine.fr/video/player_gen_cmedia=19539113&cfilm=204237.html)

When students are engaged, some spontaneity and flexibility from teachers is needed in order to make them feel free to share their knowledge, not about the target language itself, but about any topic, experiences, ideas and opinions. And then, by using the target language, there are no more levels or fear to make mistakes, students do their best to make themselves understood.

## 2.6 Activities, assessment possibilities and differentiation

The complete lesson covered different cross-curricular topics and resulted in different learning experiences and assessment as shown in Fig. 6 and Fig. 7

CROSS-CURRICULAR TOPICS: Literature, Art, Music, History and Cinema.

LEARNING EXPERIENCES: reading, listening comprehension, writing, speaking

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.1jour1actu.com/info-animee/cestquoila-liberte-dexpression/>

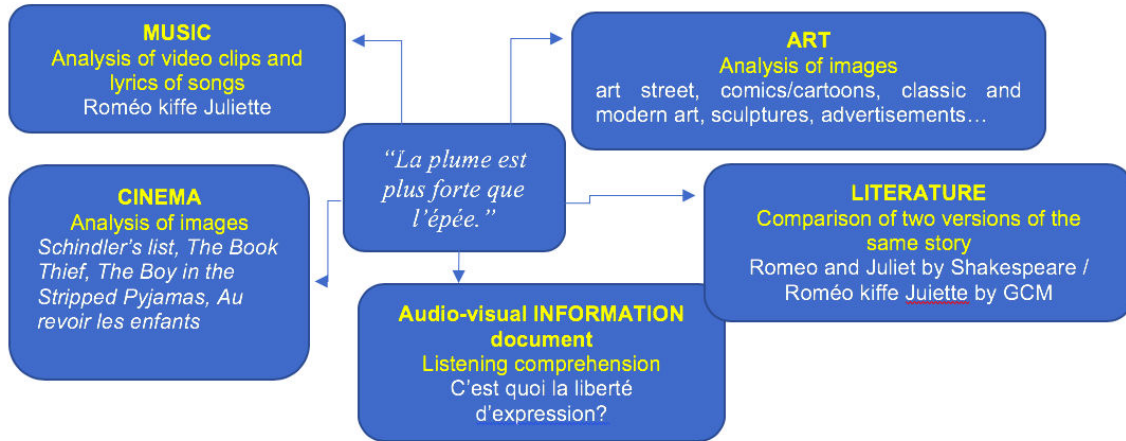


Fig 6 Learning experiences

ASSESSMENT: Writing (Personal reflection, blog, article). Oral presentations, making a video, role play, art/music project...

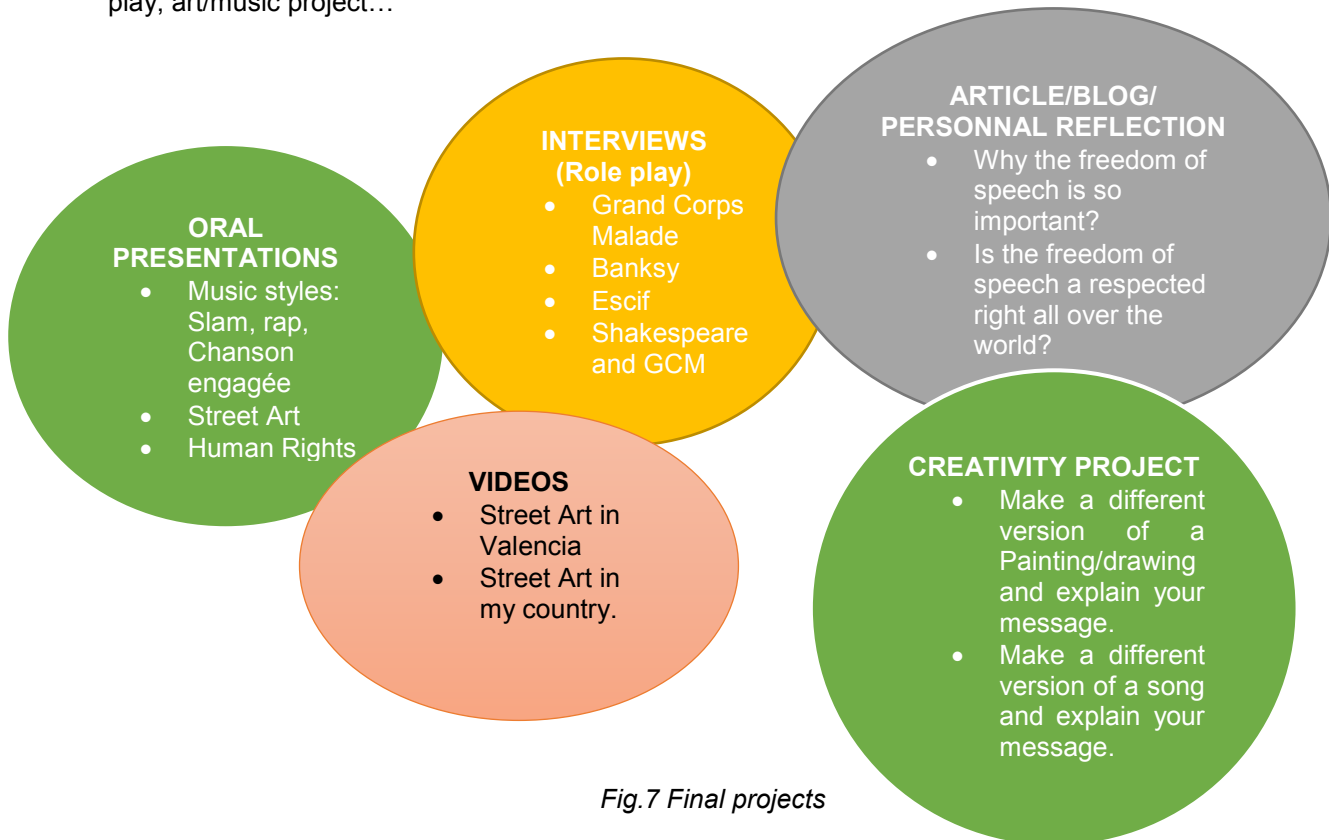


Fig.7 Final projects

### 3. Conclusion

When students have the option to collaborate with the structure of the lesson, working with topics that interest them or about topics they already know from other subjects, not only do they improve their skills in language, but the level of motivation and engagement increases considerably. They become an active part of the learning process and the use of technology, allows infinite possibilities of research and creativity so that they can discover, read, listen and share final projects. The target language becomes the tool they need to make their tasks, reflections and projects while they feel free to choose topics in order to link the French culture with their own and with previous knowledge. This is done so the classroom becomes a place to share knowledge, opinions and topics of interest, feeling unique and different, which is the best practice of interculturality.

