

Lady Liberté Shares Her French Heritage

David Lasserre describes how a non-profit program is helping young New Yorkers retain their French flavor

They came from Haiti, Algeria, Ivory Coast, Togo, Mali, Guinea, Senegal... For the last three years, students in the French Heritage Language program have cultivated their biculturalism while keeping up their French — one of their native languages.

A self-funded program run by the non-

profit foundation FACE (French-American Cultural Exchange), in partnership with the Cultural Services of the French Embassy, the French Heritage Language Program (FHLP) offers free, culture-based French classes to students of French-speaking background enrolled in New York City public schools.

Teachers in this program have to work their tails off to make it happen — there's no market for "French heritage" textbooks yet. On the upside, however, every class activity is handcrafted, and more often than not, it is designed precisely for the students actually sitting in the room. By the same token, the

administrators and teachers in the program give their preference to authentic resources that allow for more targeted cultural content. At the moment, students are watching Bertrand Cantet's award-winning film *Entre les murs* (*The Class*). Earlier in the year, they studied a selection of tales from Africa and the Caribbean. Next will be news articles from Haitian, African, and French websites.

As recently arrived immigrants, though, the students themselves actually supply the majority of material for debate, analysis, or written projects in this "heritage" class, be it an oral presentation of compas (a dance that any Haitian kid could teach you), an essay about marriage in the Ivory Coast, or a mock TV show on the Coupe d'Afrique des Nations (the closely-followed African Soccer Championship). This is in addition to the often impressive linguistic skills that the students acquired in their home countries, and that the French Heritage Language Program seeks to sharpen.

This program is currently offered at one public elementary school in Harlem and five public high schools of the Internationals Network for Public Schools in Brooklyn and the Bronx. This network supports a pool of international high schools that specializes in helping newly-arrived immigrants integrate and thrive in their new environment. The differentiated, project-based pedagogy successfully used in this network was a source of inspiration for the French program. The teachers implement the project-based pedagogy by making every pedagogical activity a new step towards something larger — a class blog or newspaper, the creation of a survey, a movie or arts critique, or a self-portrait. Required vocabulary and grammatical structures are learned or reviewed, then readily applied to achieve these communication goals. This allows for a good integration of the cultural elements, and boosts student motivation. As part of a differentiated pedagogy, the teachers try to adapt the resources, the tasks they assign, and their expectations to the various linguistic levels they encounter, as all their students were not exposed to the French language in the same way while in their home country.

About 20 to 35 percent of the students enrolled in the schools in which the French

program is offered came from countries where French is dominant, or one of the main languages. Depending on the school, ten to thirty students attend the French class for two to three hours each week. These schools understand the importance of maintaining their students' existing linguistic and cultural skills, and some have offered similar programs in other languages. Such programs can help immigrant students integrate faster, as research has shown that maintaining one's mother tongue may help in learning another, as lexical and grammatical comparisons, methodological skills, and flexibility of the mind are all at work. Educators also understand that the U.S. needs more multilingual speakers, so why not reinforce linguistic skills where they already exist?

Regularly represented at language conferences such as NECTFL (Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages) and ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages), the French Heritage Language Program has been working with the National Heritage Language Resource Center at UCLA since 2007. The FHLP and the NHLRC will be co-presenting for the second time this year at NECTFL. The two entities are teaming up to adapt a high school version of a survey created by the NHLRC that seeks to shed light on the relationship between heritage speakers at college level and their heritage language and culture. The FHLP is also a member of the Center for Applied Linguistics' Alliance for the Advancement of Heritage Languages based in Washington, DC.

The students themselves often point out the need to keep speaking French while in the U.S. Many see it as essential to be able to maintain good communication with family members and friends in their community or in their home country. All understand the usefulness of another language in the job market and value their native culture.

The latter often explains why the French program has become popular among the French-speaking communities of New York. Community representatives are now asking for adult classes (which will soon be offered), and demand is growing for the French Heritage Language Program Summer Camp — every July, the program offers a two-week,

intensive set of workshops and field trips at extremely low cost to any children or teenagers with a French-speaking background. Dance, theater, writing and visual arts workshops are taught by professional artists from various Francophone countries. These artistic activities are combined with visits to places such as the immigration museum and art museums, as well as more recreational sites. Finally, an essential element of the summer program consists of meetings with distinguished speakers such as the ambassador of the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie to the United Nations, and the deputy manager of the French-American Chamber of Commerce in New York: students hear about the Francophone world as a united political, cultural and linguistic entity, and get to know about professional opportunities available to the French-speaking job seeker in the U.S. In 2008, twenty-five participants also enjoyed a one-week trip to Québec as part of the French Summer Camp. For the first time in 2009, the Summer Camp will also be offered in Chicago in collaboration with Sunlight (a local African community center) and the French Consulate.

As it reaches out to Francophone communities, the FHLP's mission is to provide them with specific "heritage" French programs, as well as inform them about other programs that have been developing at a pace over the last two years. French after-schools and English/French dual language programs are now offered in a number of public elementary schools in New York. The recent mobilization of community associations around these programs is revealing the presence of a large Francophone population normally rendered invisible by the many other languages and dialects spoken within it. In schools, the FHLP has had a similar uniting effect — though they come from countries where different dialects are often used at home, the students enrolled in the class have formed a visible French-speaking community that actually uses French as a strong vehicular language in and outside of the French class. ■

David Lasserre (heritageprogram@facecouncil.org) is the program coordinator of the French Heritage Language Program.