

REIMAGINING GENDER IN THE ESL CLASSROOM

Aaranyah Shivasubramaniyam

Contact: aaranyahshiva@gmail.com



Guiding Question: How can we navigate the gendered structure of the French language in order to create a more inclusive and affirming classroom for students of all gender identities?

As a French teacher, I have begun to reflect more on the relationship between language and identity in the classroom. I notice that French is a deeply gendered language and I believe that the way it is taught can significantly impact how students see themselves in the learning space. In many classrooms, students are asked to define themselves within rigid grammatical categories without being given the space to move beyond these binaries. I have rarely encountered a student who has asked how to use they/them pronouns in French, but is that because we do not implement/introduce non-binary language in French classrooms?

As FSL teachers, we are not only teaching students the language, but we are guiding them to create an identity for themselves within that language. The first grammatical concept we teach students is to identify whether a word is masculin or féminin. These binary categories can create discomfort for students whose identities do not align with these categories, or for those who are still exploring how they wish to express themselves.

While my role as an educator does not grant me the power to change the structure of the language itself, I do have a responsibility to think carefully about how I present it to my students. I hope that my students not only feel comfortable learning French, but also that they develop a genuine interest in it. Consequently, I recognize that for some students, being required to choose a gendered form may feel insignificant, and for others, it may be a barrier to engagement and self-expression.

This mini toolkit reflects my commitment to approaching FSL teaching through a student-centered lens. Rather than attempting to “fix” the language itself, I seek to create a space for all learners to see themselves reflected in the classroom and to engage with French in ways that feel both accessible and affirming. To do this, I introduce a variety of ways to introduce the pronoun *iel* in the FSL classroom.



Key Challenges in the FSL Classroom

- Grammatical gender is unavoidable
 - Nouns, adjectives, and past participles require agreement, making gender an inevitable presence in the language.
- Early emphasis on identity-based language
 - Beginner lessons often ask students to define themselves and introduce themselves using “traditional” labels (e.g., *Je suis un garçon / une fille*).
- Lack of alternative models
 - Traditional teaching materials often present only binary examples without offering inclusive or flexible options.

Practical Strategies for an Inclusive FSL Classroom

- Provide Flexible Language Models
 - Present multiple ways to say the same idea. As educators, we should model variation in our examples and normalize that there is not always one “correct” way to express identity.
- Prioritize Communication Over Perfection
 - Especially at the beginner level, we must value meaning and intention over grammatical accuracy. Students will feel more comfortable to experiment with their gender in the language and they are more likely to participate when they feel safe making mistakes.
- Avoid Forcing Self-Identification
 - Be mindful of activities that require students to label themselves. Avoid requiring introductory statements like: *Je suis un garçon / une fille*. Instead, offer open-ended prompts like, “*Je me décris comme...*” or “*Je suis quelqu’un qui...*”.
- Create Space of Ongoing Reflection
 - We need to acknowledge that language and identity are complex. Be open to learning with your students and create a classroom culture where learning and reflection are reciprocal.



Why *iel*?

Beyond curriculum, this toolkit offers students the sense of belonging that they are entitled to in the classroom. For a French student, who is non-binary, deeply gendered language practices have historically excluded their identity. However, by focusing on the introduction of *iel* and neutral adjective agreements at the classroom level, students will be able to see themselves represented in the subject. The use of *iel* cannot be separated from the rest of the course or language, it must become a repetition of practice. For example, the *Qui est-ce* game functions as a good opportunity for students to get in the habit of using *iel* adjective agreements. Over time, the goal is to move beyond these repetitive, low-stakes activities to eventually become a daily practice in the classroom, where French welcomes all students.

There is a crucial need to put our beliefs into practice, which stems from the gap between policy and practice. Although there are policies in the school and board that emphasize the need for inclusion and diversity, they must be truly practiced. In the FSL context, I have often noticed in my practicum placements and during my time as a student that grammar always remains strictly binary in the French classroom. If a student's identity is excluded in a rather, traditionally, extremely gendered language, they remain isolated within that linguistic space. One thing to truly consider, as language educators, is the importance of giving students the opportunity to create an identity for themselves in the language. They are not simple learners of the language but individuals who must be considered holistically within that linguistic space. By introducing *iel* and neutral adjective agreements as a functional element of communication, this toolkit ensures that the teacher becomes the "necessary figure" who bridges the gap between policy and reality.



Now, *iel* is not an extremely recent development in the French language. According to Professor Dennis Baron from the University of Illinois, “non-gendered *iel* appeared as early as 2014” and “the pronoun drew complaints in 2017.” The French Academy, which is the council that has been overseeing matters relating to the French language since 1635, “warned that such innovations would signal the death of French.” Despite these objections, in 2021, *iel* was added to Le Robert, which is a major French dictionary. This decision gained major backlash from many Francophones who blame “le wokisme” for *iel*. However, language is forever evolving and to provide students with the best version of the language, we must be updated on the language’s evolution.

While the French Academy views *iel* as the death of the French language, by framing the exclusion of *iel* as a defence of “tradition,” we engage in a form of passive censorship that renders non-binary identities invalid under the guise of academic and linguistic rigour. When administrators or teachers label inclusive topics as “too political,” they are engaging in a form of censorship. However, these labels should not stop us from practicing true inclusivity in our classroom. Consequently, using the curriculum as a shield is the best way to support ourselves. The curriculum, from expectation strands to front matter, places an emphasis on connecting student learning to real-world events, experiences and topics. In fact, the Ontario French Curriculum preaches the need for “awareness of sociolinguistic conventions” and states, “The FSL curriculum emphasizes communicating a message by using knowledge of vocabulary, language conventions, and grammar while taking into consideration the purpose, the audience, and the situation or context... Students can take control of their learning through observation, listening, and rehearsing with others; refining their use of language; and making thoughtful and meaningful connections to the world around them.” When looking at these specific curriculum guidelines, it becomes clear that omitting *iel* in the classroom creates a significant disconnect from an awareness of sociolinguistic conventions. As educators, when we model the use of *iel* in the classroom, we allow students to refine their use of the language while making connections to the world around them. It is imperative that we take into consideration the situation and context of the classroom and the world, as we explore our knowledge of French vocabulary, language conventions, and grammar. So, *iel* becomes a necessary aspect of the Ontario school curriculum and not a lesson that is “too political” for the classroom.



Lesson Plan #1

TITLE	LENGTH	CONTEXT
Le pronom <i>iel</i>	75 minutes	In elementary school, students have learned about using <i>il/elle/ils/elles</i> as third-person pronouns. To make French more accessible and the classroom more inclusive, we are introducing <i>iel</i> today



LEARNING GOALS	SUCCESS CRITERIA
- Students will learn about the pronom <i>iel</i> and how to use it - Students will learn how language can reflect identity - Students will learn to understand and discuss new inclusive language	- Students can understand why someone might choose to use <i>iel</i> - Students can understand the main idea of the text <i>Sam utilise 'iel'</i> and create their own texts - Students can participate in a respectful discussion about language and identity

TIME ALLOTTED	INSTRUCTIONAL/LEARNING ACTIVITIES
Hook (5-10 minutes)	- To activate prior knowledge, ask students what pronouns they know in English? Then, in French? - Write responses on the board, then briefly introduce <i>iel</i>
Delivery of New Ideas (15-20 minutes)	- Teacher reads <i>Sam utilise 'iel'</i> aloud or popcorn read with the class - Pause and ask questions like the following: - Qui est Sam? - Qu'est ce que Sam aime? - Quel pronom est-ce que Sam utilise? - Mini-lesson - Write <i>il, elle, iel</i> to explain the function of <i>iel</i> and why it is important that we implement it - Review some of the agreements and adjectives presented in the book for the pronoun <i>iel</i> (intelligent.e)
Practice and Production (30-35 minutes)	- Students will create their own mini-book inspired by the text, using blank paper - Create a short story about either themselves or a character if they are not comfortable writing about themselves - Introduce their pronouns - Description of the character - Students will hand in their books to the teacher at the end of class
Consolidation (5-10 minutes)	- Ask students to submit their books - Return supplies to their places - Reinforce idea that language is something that can grow and change and pronouns help us find our identity within language

Lesson Plan #2

TITLE	LENGTH	CONTEXT
Les accords des adjectifs	75 minutes	After learning about the pronom <i>iel</i> , students will learn how to do adjective agreements for <i>il</i> , <i>elle</i> , and <i>iel</i>



LEARNING GOALS	SUCCESS CRITERIA
- Students will learn about adjective agreements - Students will learn about the differences in adjective agreements for <i>il/elle/iel</i> - Students will create their own sentences using appropriate adjective agreements	- Students can explain the different adjective agreements for <i>il/elle/iel</i> - Students can write their own sentences using <i>il/elle/iel</i> and adjective agreements

TIME ALLOTTED	INSTRUCTIONAL/LEARNING ACTIVITIES
Hook (5-10 minutes)	- Hand back student books from yesterday - Review prior knowledge of adjective agreements - Use the following sentences and ask students to help with agreements: - Il est gentil/gentille. - Elle est beau/belle. - Introduce that we will be exploring adjective agreements for <i>iel</i>
Delivery of New Ideas (15-20 minutes)	- Using the '<u>Les adjectifs et les accordes</u>' slides (adapted from <u>Jennifer Bairos</u>), review inclusive terms and the issue of gendered language in French - Continue with lesson
Practice and Production (30-35 minutes)	- Assign each table group a slide to work on (slides 11-15), where they can practice various verb agreements - Review answers as a class where each group can present their slides
Consolidation (5-10 minutes)	- Write one compliment about yourself or the person sitting next to you using adjective agreements. - Teacher collects exit slips for understanding of student learning

Activity/Game

TITLE	LENGTH	CONTEXT
Qui-est ce?	As long as you want!	After practicing reading and writing skills using gender inclusive pronouns and adjective agreements, students will work on the speaking and listening skills with a game of "Guess Who"



LEARNING GOALS	SUCCESS CRITERIA
- Students will practice oral inquiry to describe a person - Students will develop listening skills to identify gender markers - Students will apply appropriate adjective agreements in speech	- Students can ask a "Yes/No" question using il/elle/iel - I can narrow down a character by listening to the information my partner gives me - I can describe a character using the correct agreement sound (sportif/sportive/sportif.ve)

TIME ALLOTTED	INSTRUCTIONAL/LEARNING ACTIVITIES
Hook (10-15 minutes)	- Review how to use adjective agreements - Review question structures: <i>Est-ce qu'il a...</i>, <i>Est-ce qu'il a...</i>, <i>Est-ce qu'elle a...</i> - Remind students to stray away from "traditional" questions like <i>Est-ce que c'est un homme ou une femme?</i>, instead we should say <i>Quels sont leurs pronoms?</i> - Review pronunciation of adjective agreements
Practice and Production	- Ask students to find a partner or group of three - Hand out <i>Qui-est ce?</i> Sheets - Explain game before letting students play: - Ask only yes or no questions to your partner using the appropriate adjective agreements and pronouns - Using your partner's responses, eliminate the characters on your board to leave you with your answers - All answers and questions must be said in French - You can choose how long you want students to play - Walk around for a formative understanding of student's learning
Consolidation (5-10 minutes)	Provide students with a 3-2-1 exit slip Billet de Sortie : 3-2-1 Inclusif Nom: _____ 3 adjectifs inclusifs que j'ai utilisés aujourd'hui 2 choses que j'ai apprises sur l'identité et la langue française 1 façon dont je peux être un.e allié.e dans mon cours de français



The Inclusive Classroom

Ensuring that your classroom is a welcoming space will allow students to feel more comfortable and a safe way to do this is by including inclusive posters in the FSL classroom. Beyond decoration, effective classroom signage provides daily reminders that French is not strictly binary in your classroom. It removes the “otherness” often associated with gender-neutral language, making it a standard aspect of language. When students can simply look at a wall to find the words that represent them, French becomes a reality where they can express their true identities.

Here are some examples of posters, ready to print for your classroom!



Aujourd'hui je suis...



Content.e



Triste



Ridicule



Ennuyé.e



Courageux.se



Anxieux.se



Fâché.e



Fatigué.e



Enthousiaste



MON PRONOM

QUEL EST TON PRONOM?

MON PRONOM EST...

IL/ILS

ELLE/ELLES

IEL/IELS

AVOIR

J'ai

Tu as

Il/Elle/El a

Nous avons

Vous avez

Ils/Elles/Elles ont

ÊTRE

Je suis

Tu es

Il/Elle/El est

Nous sommes

Vous êtes

Ils/Elles/El sont

Aller

Je vais

Tu vas

Il/Elle/le va

Nous allons

Vous allez

Ils/Elles/ils vont