

## I think, therefore I am

**Level:** Upper-intermediate +

**Time:** 90 minutes +

**Summary:** This lesson is about France and the mentality of the French, especially in business. In this lesson, students:

1. look at stereotypes of various nationalities;
2. read a text about the French and their way of doing business;
3. examine the use of foreign words in English and in their own languages;
4. put together advice for foreigners doing business in their country.

**Materials:** One copy of the worksheet per student; one copy of the vocabulary record per student

**Group size:** Any

**Note:** This lesson plan is for both pre-experience and in-work business students based on an original article first published in *Business Spotlight* issue 6/2015. This is a shortened version.

### National stereotypes

Get students to work in pairs and complete the word wheels with words that they associate with the three nationalities given. When the word wheels are complete, students should compare them and talk about what stereotypes appear most frequently. Discuss briefly whether these stereotypes provide negative or positive images of these nationalities and whether they are really true or fair. Be sensitive to the possibility that some students may feel criticized or a bit sensitive during this activity.

### Key words

Students read the definitions and find the key words in the article. After you have checked the answers, they should read the article again and notice how the words are used in context. Note that the definitions for the words are given in the order the words appear in the article.

### Key:

1. rivalry
2. revelled in
3. initiator
4. hegemony
5. unrestrained
6. cherished
7. deceive
8. rigorously
9. ingeniousness
10. discursive
11. altruism
12. xenophobic
13. provincialism
14. charismatic
15. consensus
16. eloquent

### Understanding the article

This task checks the students' understanding of the article. Discuss the answers to any questions they find difficult to answer.

### Key: (suggested answers)

1. as one of rivalry and that they are 'the best of enemies'
2. It says that 'Germanophobia' is increasing and that France is worried about Germany's political strength and influence.
3. intercultural training
4. It treats them as though they are very special national treasures.
5. A time of enlightenment after a period of extreme religious intolerance. It became a central part of France's national identity.
6. The rise of the xenophobic National Front political party and a suspicion of other social groups and cultures that do not share France's values.
7. They must be exceptionally well informed and have a complete overview of all the complex factors that go into resolving a problem or running a project or organization.
8. The French are expected to be eloquent and to be able to argue a point very well. They will logically build up a case before getting to the point.

### Expressions

Ask students to work with a partner to match the expressions from the article with their meanings, then check answers as a class.

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**Extension:** Choose three or four expressions that you think will be useful for your students and get them to write a sentence of their own using each expression.

**Key:**

*Two-word expressions*

1. *c*
2. *a*
3. *e*
4. *b*
5. *d*

*Three-word expressions*

1. *d*
2. *c*
3. *a*
4. *b*

*Four-word expressions*

1. *a*
2. *c*
3. *b*

### Foreign words

- a. First, the students match the French words with their English meanings.
- b. Then, they should discuss why they think some are in italics and some are not. Answer: Words that are likely to be unfamiliar to the intended audience are written in italics. Words that have become anglicized are not italicized.
- c. Finally, students should think about and discuss which foreign words are commonly used in their language and whether they think they would be written in italics.

**Key:**

1. *f*
2. *h*
3. *g*
4. *c*
5. *a*
6. *d*
7. *b*
8. *e*

### France – Fast facts

Students use the figures to complete the fast facts about France.

**Extension:** Extend this task by getting the students to write a similar 'fast facts' file for a country that they regularly do business with. Discuss how having this knowledge might assist them in their business activities.

**Key:**

1. 12
2. 2
3. 1
4. 67
5. 10.3
6. 0.2

### Good to know – Extra reading and group task

Students read the facts about doing business in France. Then, either as a whole class or in small groups, they should come up with similar facts that could be sent to their international business partners and used as helpful tips in preparation for a business trip to the students' country.

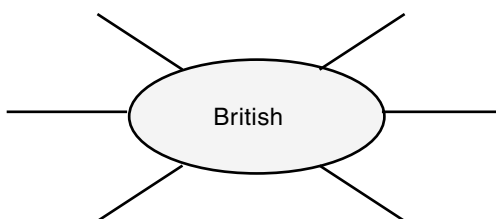
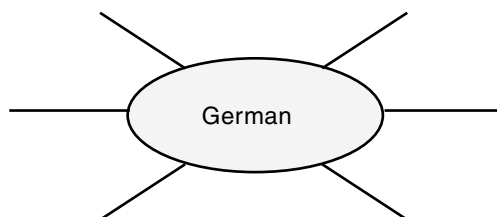
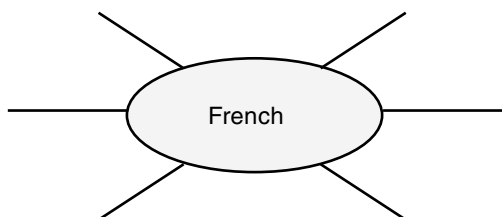
### Vocabulary record

Here, students should be encouraged to record all of the new and useful vocabulary they have learnt during the lesson, not only in the form presented in the article but also in related forms.

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### 1 National stereotypes

What do people often say when they talk about the three nationalities below? Write words onto the wheels. Then, compare your 'stereotype wheels' with other students.



### 2 Key words

Read the definitions. Then, find the key words in the article. The paragraph numbers are given to help you.

1. a situation in which people, teams, businesses etc compete with one another (para 1)
2. enjoyed something very much (two words, para 1)
3. the person or country that started off a process (para 2)
4. political control or influence, especially by one country over other countries (para 3)
5. expressing your feelings in an uncontrolled way (para 6)
6. looked after because they are loved so much (para 6)
7. make someone believe a false idea (para 7)
8. do something in a thorough and very careful way (para 7)
9. the ability to be clever and invent new things (para 9)
10. including information that is not relevant to the main subject (para 9)
11. a way of thinking or behaving that shows you care about other people and their interests more than you care about yourself (para 9)
12. a word to describe people who have a strong fear and dislike of people from other countries and cultures (para 10)
13. the attitudes of people who do not easily accept new or different ideas (para 11)
14. with a strong personal quality that makes other people like them and be attracted to them (para 12)
15. agreement among all the people involved (para 17)
16. expressing what you mean by using clear and effective language (para 20)

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by Vicki Sussens



**When considering France, who doesn't think about laissez-faire or 'liberty, equality, fraternity'? Vicki Sussens describes how, despite cultural differences, the citizens of the largest EU country manage to keep a good relationship with their European neighbours.**

- 1 What makes the French French? Ask an Englishman and he is likely to roll his eyes. The rivalry between the two countries goes back centuries. France dreamed of civilizing the world but it was the English whose language became the world's lingua franca. Former Prime Minister Winston Churchill revelled in this when he told British soldiers during the Second World War that, if they weren't understood in France, they should just "speak louder".
- 2 The *Financial Times* newspaper recently described France and Britain as the "best of enemies". The German-French relationship, however, is far more troubled by history. And yet the EU leadership lies heavily on the shoulders of this odd couple, with France as an initiator of the EU and Germany as its *raison d'être*.
- 3 **German and French leaders** take care to play down their differences and to promote the "Franco-German friendship". But Germany's increasingly dominant role in the euro crisis has led to cracks in that unity, with Angela Merkel's strict austerity straining her relationship with the more laissez-faire French President, François Hollande. Earlier in 2015, the German magazine *Der Spiegel* reported that "Germanophobia" was on the rise in France, saying that "the fear of German hegemony is likely nowhere so great as it is in France, which was at least partially occupied by its neighbour three times during an 80-year period".
- 4 Fear, rivalries and a lack of cultural understanding play a key role in Europe's complex relationships, say intercultural experts. And, in times of tension, national stereotypes are played up. "The finger-pointing during the euro crisis has been just horrible," says Sabine Montesquieu, who runs Montesquieu Consulting in Vienna. She believes that politicians, economists and the media could all benefit from intercultural training.
- 5 **Cultures develop slowly**, over hundreds of years. They are shaped by history, religion and sociocultural factors and form belief systems that are passed from one generation to another. "The belief systems are

programmed into us from birth and are very hard to change," says Keith Warburton, owner of Global Business Culture in the UK. All the more reason for a careful analysis of why people from certain countries behave the way they do. When we phone for an interview with French intercultural expert Pierre-Robert Cloet, who runs the consultancy Valeur Europe in Paris, he is on the Côte d'Azur and is cooking. It seems like the perfect moment to ask him what makes him French.

First, we discuss what he is cooking. Then, he thinks a bit about what makes him feel French and says: "*Liberté, égalité, fraternité*, the motto of France. This represents an ideal for the French – although, as with every ideal, the daily news programmes show that it is not fully a reality [*laughs*]." And, then, he adds: "And cooking." The unrestrained joie de vivre of the French, combined with a soupçon of high ideals, sets them apart from their cooler-blooded EU partners, the Brits and the Germans. What distinguishes France most from other cultures, however, is its philosophical tradition. "France is arguably the world's most self-consciously intellectual country," writes *The Economist*. "Public thinkers are cherished like national treasures, given airtime on television and column inches in *Le Monde*."

**This tradition was analyzed** by Sudhir Hazareesingh, a Mauritian with strong ties to France, in his book *How the French Think: An Affectionate Portrait of an Intellectual People*. Hazareesingh traces French intellectualism back to the Enlightenment, which marked a return to an "Age of Reason" in the late 17th and 18th centuries, after a period of extreme religious intolerance. The French philosopher and scientist René Descartes (1596–1650), the "father of modern philosophy", coined the phrase *cogito ergo sum* ("I think, therefore I am"). Descartes argued that the only certain fact in life is that we exist and we know we exist because we think. However, because our senses – and other people – can deceive us, we need to question all other facts rigorously. Descartes said knowledge becomes a truth only if it is "so firm that it is impossible for us ever to have any reason for doubting". This form of rigorous analysis, also called Cartesian logic, remains strong in France today.

The search for truth in the Enlightenment was not new in Europe. Indeed, it forms the basis of the European cultural heritage, which has its roots in Greek philosophy. Nowhere else in Europe, however, did the

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Age of Reason become as central a part of a nation's identity as in France.

**9** "This ingeniousness shines through in the sheer number of mainstream concepts and discursive practices that have their origins in France," writes Hazareesingh in *The Guardian*. He lists some of them: "ideology and socialism, the invention of the figure of the 'intellectual' and of the discipline of sociology; the spatial representation of politics as between left and right; the ideas of popular sovereignty and altruism and the belief that culture should not only be democratically accessible but should be assigned to its own specific department in government (an innovation introduced in 1959 by de Gaulle on his return to power)".

**10** **The French are deeply proud** of this heritage. The darker side of France's sense of superiority, however, has been a suspicion of social groups and cultures that do not share universal French values and "a fondness for dividing the political sphere into antagonistic camps of good versus evil," says Hazareesingh, who believes France is in intellectual decline. The "ideal of a global French *rayonnement* (a combination of expansive impact and benevolent radiance) is now a distant and nostalgic memory," he writes. The rise of the xenophobic National Front is one sign: National Front leader Marine Le Pen was included in *Time* magazine's 2015 list of the world's 100 most influential leaders.

**11** Hazareesingh is not alone in this view. French historian Pierre Nora, an expert on French identity, wrote in 2010 that France had become a land of "shrinking horizons, the atomization of the life of the mind and national provincialism". However, while France no longer leads the intellectual avant-garde, intellectualism still dominates French leadership culture. "It is the single most important factor in creating France's elite," says Pierre-Robert Cloet. "It may be a generalization but, if you want to compare cultures, this is what distinguishes France from other countries."

**12** Cloet says that French leaders are expected to be exceptionally well informed. "They must have a complete overview of all the complex factors that go into resolving a problem or running a project or organization." This is one reason for France's hierarchical business culture, in which heads of companies are usually charismatic figures who have studied at one of the *grandes écoles* (top universities) and whose authority is respected.

**13** "The French educational model trains people to think," says Cloet. "It is all-encompassing, including science, philosophy and literature. There is also

a strong focus on mathematics, which helps train the mind to think systematically. The French see themselves as generalists."

**14** **For all these reasons**, the intellect is strongly valued in France and those skilled in rhetoric have a greater chance of success. And herein lies the rub. "When the French argue a point, they give their everything," says German intercultural expert Kerstin Martel. "This is a form of self-assurance that is often misinterpreted as arrogance or self-importance by foreigners. But, in France, if you are not 100 per cent convinced of your point of view, you won't be heard."

**15** **British intercultural expert** Keith Warburton explains the British perspective: "A Brit will first present a solution and then back it up. But the French will build up a case before getting to the point. How something is said often appears to be more important than what is said. The result is that the French can be very discursive."

**16** Warburton is quick to say that cultural differences can lead to conflict and inefficiency. "We Brits are light on analysis. We come up with a gut reaction and, then, want to discuss the reasons for it. So, when the French go through their logic before getting to the answer, we get bored and stop listening. The French, on the other hand, don't trust our solutions because they are not based on logic," he explains. "The French are also often critical of the British way of changing a decision that was made too quickly. In France, the goal is to reach the right decision through careful argument and then to stick to it."

**17** From a German perspective, French meetings can be very confusing. "In Germany generally, there is less going back and forth than in France and interrupting is considered impolite," says Martel. "At the end of the meeting, a consensus on the best way forward should be reached. In France, however, the purpose of a meeting is not necessarily to make a decision or to analyze facts but to test various theses by developing antitheses. Later, the boss will use that information to make a decision. Final decisions are often made in informal settings, like round the coffee machine. 'Let's have a coffee' can mean 'I have something important to discuss with you'."

**18** **English- or German-speaking** workers who tend to be team-oriented and used to flatter organizational structures often misunderstand the French hierarchical system, says the Austrian intercultural expert Montesquieu. "The French learn from an early age to accept and respect authority. In exchange, they are given a lot of freedom to be creative. They are also protected by their boss, who is a sort of father figure, something you don't have in the Anglo-Saxon work culture. In fact,

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a boss who does not tell his staff what to do is regarded as incompetent in France.”

**19** Montesquieu, who trains Erasmus students, says the younger French generation do challenge hierarchies – but, then, the young everywhere often challenge what has gone before. “Performance and a good turn of phrase are still as important today in French meetings as they always have been. I don’t think that culture is going to change quickly,” she says.

**20** Pierre-Robert Cloet does see changes, however – not so much in the culture as in the way cultural competence

grows as firms internationalize. “I was recently in an Arabic-speaking country for a large EU firm, where a German made a presentation full of facts and figures and then a Frenchman started his eloquent speech. Later, in our training session, both said the other had been unprofessional. When I explained the intercultural background, they laughed at how stereotypically they had behaved. Afterwards, the Germans and French went out for a good beer,” he says.

*Vicki Sussens is a feature writer who edits the Intercultural and Management sections of Business Spotlight.*

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### 3 Understanding the article

Answer the questions with information from the article.

1. How is the relationship between France and England described?  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. According to a report, how do the French currently feel about their German neighbours?  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. What does Sabine Montesquieu think politicians, economists and the media need?  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. What relationship does France have with its intellectuals and public thinkers?  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. What was the ‘Age of Reason’ and why is it so important in this context?  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. What danger signs lead Hazareesingh to believe that France is currently in intellectual decline?  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. How are French leaders and bosses expected to behave?  
\_\_\_\_\_
8. How does French rhetoric differ from that of its neighbours?  
\_\_\_\_\_

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### 4 Expressions

Match the expressions from the article with their meanings.

#### Two-word expressions

- |                      |  |
|----------------------|--|
| 1. odd couple        | a. putting the blame on someone  |
| 2. finger-pointing   | b. an amount of space in a newspaper   |
| 3. national treasure | c. two people, organizations or countries that you would not expect to be together and work together             |
| 4. column inches     | d. a spontaneous feeling or an immediate decision made without thinking for very long                            |
| 5. gut reaction      | e. a famous person who is loved by many people in a country, especially someone who has had a long public career |

#### Three-word expressions

- |                        |  |
|------------------------|--|
| 1. roll your eyes      | a. increasing  |
| 2. play something down | b. to invent a new expression  |
| 3. on the rise         | c. to try to make a problem or difficult situation seem less important than it is                    |
| 4. coin the phrase     | d. to move your eyes upwards or round in a circle, usually to show that you are annoyed or impatient |

#### Four-word expressions

- |                          |  |
|--------------------------|--|
| 1. herein lies the rub   | a. this is where the difficulty is                   |
| 2. build up a case       | b. an elegant way of expressing yourself             |
| 3. a good turn of phrase | c. to put together arguments to help prove something |

### 5 Foreign words

- Match the French words below with their English meanings, then find them in the article to read them again in context.
- Why do you think some are in *italics* and some are not?
- Which foreign words are commonly used in your language?

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| 1. raison d'être                       | a. a very small amount   |
| 2. laissez-faire                       | b. influence and radiance  |
| 3. <i>liberté, égalité, fraternité</i> | c. enjoying life   |
| 4. joie de vivre                       | d. new and experimental ideas and methods in art, music or literature      |
| 5. soupçon                             | e. most prestigious universities   |
| 6. avant-guard                         | f. the reason or justification for being and existing                      |
| 7. rayonnement                         | g. liberty, equality, fraternity   |
| 8. <i>grandes écoles</i>               | h. the idea of leaving things to take their own course and not interfering |

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### 6 France – Fast facts

Can you guess the 'Fast facts' about France? Fill in the gaps, using the numbers from the box below.

0.2

1

2

12

10.3

67

**Official name:** the French Republic

**Government:** Republic

**Capital:** Paris (1) \_\_\_\_\_ million inhabitants (2015)

**Other major cities:** Lyon (2) \_\_\_\_\_ million, Bordeaux (3) \_\_\_\_\_ million, Marseilles 850,000 (2015)

**Chief of state:** President François Hollande (since 15 May 2012)

**Head of government:** Prime Minister Manuel Valls (since 1 April 2014)

**Population:** (4) \_\_\_\_\_ million (2015)

**Official language:** French

**GDP (at purchasing power parity):** \$2.6 trillion (2014 est.)

**Real growth rate of GDP:** 0.0% (2nd quarter 2015)\*

**Unemployment:** (5) \_\_\_\_\_% (1st quarter 2015)\*

**Inflation:** (6) \_\_\_\_\_% (July 2015)\*

**Main trading partners:** Germany, Belgium, Italy, Spain, the UK, the US, Netherlands, China

**Main religions:** France does not gather data on people's religions

**Ethnic groups:** Celtic and Latinate with Germanic, Slavic, North African, Indochinese and Basque minorities

### 7 Good to know – Extra reading and group task

Read the facts below about doing business in France. Then work with your group to create a list of facts about business in your own country.

#### In France

- A good educational background, intellect and eloquence are highly valued.
- French firms typically have charismatic leaders who guide the general direction of the company.
- French firms are hierarchical.
- Socializing across hierarchical lines is unusual.
- Promotion is based on seniority, educational achievement and competence.
- Decisions are made from the top down, with meetings used to gather information to make decisions.
- Staff seldom openly disagree with the boss in a meeting. Instead, disagreements will be discussed informally before the meeting.
- Competitiveness is strong and can make teams difficult to manage.
- Logic is expected and respected. Any lack of logic can be interpreted as sloppy thinking or lack of intelligence.
- Colleagues often use first names (especially among the younger generation). Surnames will be used in formal situations, however.
- Humour is based on wit and the intelligent use of satire. The French are less likely to use humour in serious business situations.
- A clear distinction is made between business life and private life and between business time and family time.
- Business lunches can be long and are meant for building relationships, not business.



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Vocabulary record: Topic: I think, therefore I am

verb	noun	adjective	adverb
cherish			
	truth		
		xenophobic	
			rigorously

Vocabulary record

