Henry IV not only did not bathe for months (if ever) and liked to rub himself with herrings, but he would not leave home without a herring hanging on his back and another on his chest so that vermin would go for the herring and leave him alone. Jokes apart, the stage de langue française organised by the French Region of AIIC in July 2003 was a fascinating and enriching experience for the 30 pioneering/enterprising participants who took part in this exciting week.

Participants included AIIC members and candidates from as far away as Colombia, the US and Cyprus, as well as several colleagues from the European region with French as their B, C or “D” language. In spite of the differences, all felt the course was a resounding success and benefited them enormously.

The course was organised thematically. Each day was dedicated to a topic: culture, literature, politics, law, education, current/colloquial language and the press. A mere listing of the topics however does not do justice to the depth and scope of the presentations and the insight into French society provided by the excellent presenters. Each was an expert in his field and was passionate about his/her subject. They included a judge specialised in family and children’s issues, a specialist in education with a broad and varied personal experience in the French system, an assistant to the Minister of Agriculture, an economist and a sociologist, among others.

The review of French cultural policies and their effect on French society included a discussion of l’intermittance, a hot topic in France today. We were able in fact to experience some of the debate first hand when the class attended a performance of the Malade Imaginaire at the Comédie Française. The performance was preceded by impassioned speeches given by two representatives of the intermittants urging the audience to support their cause. By the reaction of the audience we could sense that French society is divided on the issue.

One would think that a discussion of the problems of social security in France could be very boring and mirror the endless lectures we have had to interpret at one time or another. However, Florence Lefresne, PhD in Economy and a researcher at the Institut de Recherches Economiques et Sociales, transformed it into a fascinating lecture by concentrating on pension funding and its ideological implications for an aging population in France and elsewhere.

The program also included visits that complemented the experience in the classroom. Particularly interesting was the visit to the Palais de Justice where we were able to enter four courtrooms and listen to the proceedings – some of which were more gripping than many a soap opera! The debate at the National Assembly on a law restricting immigration allowed us to visualize and better understand the political system we had just heard described.

However, not all was work. Our French colleagues incorporated into the program other aspects of
French life, such as a dinner at one of three vineyards in the Paris region and a wonderful gourmet lunch.

Although we were all exhausted at the end of this very intensive nine-to-five week, we were also exhilarated by the experience. Evidence of the interest students had in the course is the fact that nobody missed a session even though the big summer sales were on everywhere in Paris!!!!

The French region is to be commended for the planning, coordination and logistics that made this first time undertaking such a resounding success. They thought of everything that would make our life pleasant: metro and city maps, coffee breaks, sandwiches brought to us when lunch breaks were short and colleagues always present to guide us through the day with tips.

We really hope their success will convince them that this seminar should become a yearly event.

Idette Swetye and Estela Zaffaroni are both freelance interpreters based in Washington.

Recommended citation format: