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E-CURRICULUM

Schools Fuel Demand for High-Tech Language Labs

Comfort Vandi and Dominic Buie study Spanish in the language lab at Dr. Henry A. Wise Jr. High School in Upper Marlboro, Md.
—Christopher Powers/Digital Directions

Tools emphasize speaking, recording

By Michelle R. Davis

When students of Spanish teacher Sean M. Boettinger put on their headsets in his Maryland high school's language lab, their concentration heightens, he says.

The up-to-date digital equipment, says the teacher, keeps them engaged with teenage-friendly electronics, allows them to get more Spanish listening and speaking practice, and, most important, blocks out distractions.

"Particularly in classes that have a hard time paying attention, having those headphones on, and me being able to speak through that microphone directly into their ears with no outside noises, is a great focusing tool," says Boettinger, who teaches at Dr. Henry A. Wise Jr. High School in the 134,000-student Prince George's County district.

The push to install technology-rich language labs is growing, so much so in some places that parent fundraising organizations are making it the focus of their efforts. Educators who use the labs say that they allow students to

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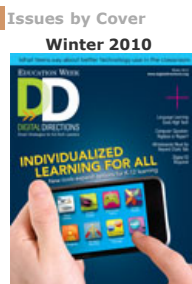
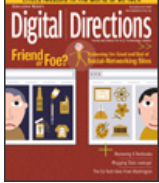their efforts. Educators who use the labs say that they allow students to spend significantly more time doing language-practice exercises, such as hearing themselves speak. The labs also take away an age-old barrier students often face when trying to learn a language: embarrassment.

"Because students are often working individually, they're less afraid of making mistakes," says Étienne Bouchard, the president of Robotel Inc., a Montreal-based company that makes language-lab technology. "They're more willing to speak, and you practice and you get better."

New Models

Language labs have been around for decades. Early models were often some variation of a student with headphones hooked up to a tape recorder pressing pause and play.

Today's digital-language labs are different. At first glance, they may appear to be a standard computer lab, but students aren't sitting in front of PCs. They have screens, a keypad, and a headset, which allow them to watch videos, read articles pushed out by the teacher, and record themselves speaking. Some products even have a digital graphing function that records students' speech in the foreign language and graphs their pronunciation and inflection in comparison with a native speaker's tone. Students can easily see how far off their speech is from the correct version in a graphic overlay.

The teacher has a central station with a monitor and

> **Tips**
>
> **1.** Determine whether your district can support the purchase of a digital language lab. Investigate raising outside money, possibly through a nonprofit education fund, if enough district money is not available.
>
> **2.** Visit nearby language labs to see whether such a setup would be right for your school or district and what you like, or don't like, about certain models.
>
> **3.** Identify which technological features would be high priorities for teachers, such as the ability to record student conversations or provide computer analysis of student pronunciation.
>
> **4.** Try to establish a balance between technological priorities and the ability of your school or district to pay for those priorities. More bells and whistles can mean a higher cost.
>
> **5.** Make sure the software will work with the equipment your school or district uses. Many of the products currently on the market work best with PCs, for instance.

keypad that helps him or her group students in many ways. For instance, the teacher can speak to all students over the headset, or to just one. The teacher typically has the ability to create whatever grouping of students is required, such as pairing two students, giving them an assignment, and telling them to discuss and work together, all over their headsets. The equipment can record their discussion for the teacher to listen to later, or can allow the teacher to pop in on the discussion live to hear it or make corrections.

The software also allows teachers to load any digital information from the Internet onto the equipment for use in class activities.

All the digital tools give students more time speaking and practicing the language than they would get in a traditional "chalk and talk" setup, says Bouchard of Robotel. "Learning languages is a reflex mechanism," Bouchard says. "It's built through practice."

His company's software costs from $500 to $1,800 a seat, depending on a school's requirements.

'Just Me and the Teacher'

Language-lab equipment also gives teachers more time to teach, says Scott M. Hansen, a vice president of Sanako Inc., a Finland-based company that makes digital-language-lab technology and has a U.S. headquarters office in Albany, N.Y.

For example, he says, Advanced Placement language courses require students to undergo an oral exam that may take 15 minutes of speaking

directly to the teacher. In the past, teachers would have to pull each student to the hallway for the oral exam, while other students kept themselves occupied in class. Depending on the number of students in a class, that activity could take the whole period.

With a digital language lab, says Hansen, the students can take the oral exam, using their headphones and microphones, all at once. Their comments are recorded, and the teacher can listen to each student later.

Many of the companies that provide the equipment for language labs are based outside the United States because of a higher demand for them in places such as Asia and Europe, where people more commonly speak more than one language, says Hansen. But he says there's an increasing demand for such products domestically.

Players in the Industry
Digital Learning Language Lab Multimedia Learning Center

Robotel Inc.

SANAKO Inc.

SANS Inc.

At Holmdel High School in Holmdel, N.J., school supporters were so impressed with the digital language lab they viewed at a nearby school that they pledged to use their school's parent-fundraising arm, the Holmdel Foundation for Educational Excellence, to raise the $150,000 officials estimate it would take to install one.

"These things allow collaboration, recording of conversation, the ability to manage all the speaking with groups and individuals," says Kevin D. Bals, an assistant principal at Holmdel High. He is working with the foundation, and he played a similar role at nearby Rumson-Fair Haven Regional High School to raise $150,000 for a high-tech language lab several years ago.

When Bals took a group of parents to visit Rumson-Fair Haven to look at the language lab there, they saw students working quietly in front of monitors, wearing headsets. That lab has dividers between students to cut down on noise, Bals says.

"One parent put on a headset to try it out and said, 'It felt like just me and the teacher,' " he says.

The Holmdel foundation was presented with three options for a large fundraising campaign this year: the language lab, LCD projectors in every classroom, or installation of wireless Internet throughout the school building. The foundation chose to raise money for the language lab, Bals says, because parents felt it was

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important for students to learn to speak other languages, especially in preparation to compete for jobs in a global economy.

Problems and Solutions

Educators such as Boettinger, the Maryland Spanish teacher, caution that high-tech language-learning tools should not overshadow the role of the teacher, and that they are not capable of fully taking the place of traditional classroom approaches. Spanish and French classes at his school do not use the lab every day.

"If we used it every day, my students would be bored and I'd become bored," he says. "It can get repetitive. We've got to vary instruction to keep it exciting."

Training for teachers is also important, Boettinger says, or schools risk

spending money on the new tools and then finding that teachers rarely use them or use them poorly.

Bouchard, of Robotel, says his company makes it a priority to do more than just cursory training on the equipment for language teachers. The company encourages activity training, which entails getting teachers to simulate what they'd do in class using the new technologies, and then coaches them over time on best practices.

One problem that schools have run into is that most of the digital-language-lab software on the market is based on using PCs and Microsoft Windows technology, ignoring the needs of schools that use a Macintosh platform.

That's what the Multimedia Learning Center at Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill., ran into when it was looking for a new high-tech language lab to replace its analog system. The learning center creates and supports new technology, primarily aimed at helping professors in the school's Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences provide high-quality education to students.

So Zachary Schneirov, a software developer there, created a system that would work for the college of arts and sciences. He developed software that allows for features similar to those offered by other companies, but that interfaces with Apple Inc.'s Macintosh computers.

The center's software has since been used by high schools and by other colleges and universities around the country, at a cost of about $10,000 for a single school. "Our goal was not to sell the software, but to answer the needs of our faculty," Schneirov says. "When people find out about it, they want it."

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piccolo wrote:

"Because students are often working individually, they're less afraid of making mistakes"

Making mistakes is a part of every learning process and particularly learning foreign languages. In my Jr. high, high school, and college foreign language courses, I also worried about using the wrong word, verb tense, or conjugation and it just seemed strange to me to speak in a different language. But if a person is ever to use a foreign language to speak to someone, then that is something he or she must get over. Less talking in class will mean fewer opportunities to get used to speaking and to get over the embarrassment.

I agree that technology can certainly enhance language learning, but I also think that speaking out loud in class, whether with the whole class, in groups, or in couples, is probably the most important exercise in learning a language, at least learning to speak it.

1/11/2010 1:28 PM EST on EdWeek

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Fangtai wrote:

Advances in technology generally aid in gaining stident involvement and interactive technologies are especially effective in the rapid communication world that we live in today. This does not mean that tried and true methods do not work, or that they do not work well. It is just a bit more engaging to use the newer equipment. This equipment, like all AV equipment will eventually be overused and newer , more exciting technologies will emerge. As new things

emerge, those that are new and exciting now will become cheaper to acquire and be just as effective on students that have had no exposure. This is a top down profile. Wealthier school districts will get the new technologies first and the rest will add it on as it becomes more universally available. A Wii could be installed in every classroom, and the price would slowly but surely lower as s teachers find educational uses for the new gadgetry.

1/11/2010 3:17 PM EST on EdWeek

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Kimberly Banks wrote:

Before you invest in a language lab, find out what several companies, like those mentioned in this article, have to offer. If it is not possible for you to visit labs in your community or in neighboring communities, invite representatives from the companies to demonstrate their products at your school. Have your world language teachers determine which products would benefit their students most, which products offer elements that they are otherwise unable to provide students in the "traditional" classroom setting, and which products they will actually have time to use.

When budgeting for a language lab, it is critical to include the cost of TRAINING the teachers to use it. Even if you install the very best lab money can buy, it will be useless if your teachers do not know how to use it and use it effectively with their students.

1/11/2010 4:02 PM EST on EdWeek

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J. Krouskoff wrote:

At the Clarkstown Central School district in Rockland County, NY, we considered a lab such as the ones described in the article. However, we ultimately decided to use VoiceThread as a tool for providing our students with anytime/anywhere access that allows them to practice speaking more frequently and in self-directed, authentic exercises in the target language. Teachers and students collaborate on authentic projects that require more vocal interactions from all students than is possible in the traditional classroom.

This decision was also closely aligned to our district's commitment to high quality, low-cost/no cost solutions that enable students to take ownership of their learning.
The use of this tool for multiple disciplines reduces the number of systems, tools, and services our students need to master. Students use the district's VoiceThread services in a variety of areas, including elementary school and art.

What was initially selected as a tool for students to practice and master world languages quickly became a valuable asset for students in a variety of disciplines, and the broad range of student projects is testimony to the power of extending opportunities beyond the classroom and the teacher.

John Krouskoff
Director of Instructional Technology
Clarkstown Central School District, NY

1/11/2010 5:56 PM EST on EdWeek

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teachingontherun wrote:

Thank you John Krouskoff for your input. I am currently teaching oral English in China, where sometimes resources are difficult to attain. I appreciate the other program, Voice Thread, that you mentioned. I am going to look into it.

Additionally, I understand what Piccolo mentioned about making mistakes is part of learning a language. I think that the view of making mistakes as a part of learning is a limited cultural perspective. I am teaching English in China and making mistakes is considered "losing face", which is a big social faux pas. Finding

a balance between telling a student to get over the embarrassment of making a mistake, and being culturally sensitive is important. Maybe limited use of the technology could facilitate this balance.

1/11/2010 11:06 PM EST on EdWeek

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skrashen wrote:

The late Gerald Bracey pointed out that technology makes it possible to do things in nanoseconds that shouldn't be done at all.

Why not invest in something we know works: for example, self-selected reading in other languages. For the price of "$500 to $1,800 a seat" just think how many books and magazines a school could buy.

1/12/2010 6:28 PM EST on EdWeek

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Marybeth Nelson wrote:

There are many ways that you can create language labs by using existing software on multipurpose labs. Programs such as Net Op combined with Microsoft office and Audacity can save a lot of money. It can also provide access to the internet as well as a well functioning language lab. It is always a good idea to see what you have on hand before investing a lot of money in a fancy language lab!

1/12/2010 6:43 PM EST on EdWeek

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