

Somerville High School students talk the talk in new language lab

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Wicked Local Somerville

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Somerville — “Bingo! Amazing!” exclaimed Somerville High School Spanish teacher Sue Olsen as what looked like an ordinary whiteboard came to life behind her.

Olsen and her Spanish 4 Honors class were enjoying a semimonthly 52-minute period in the school’s brand new language lab, a high-ceilinged space filled with rows of glossy Mac monitors equipped with headphones. Installed this past summer and equipped with Dill software by Chicago-based Swift Education Systems using \$53,000 from the school budget, the 28-station lab serves the high school’s 750 Spanish, French, Italian and Mandarin students and nine world language teachers, according to new world language director James Nocito, who gained experience with this type of lab while teaching in Lexington public schools.

After watching bubbles with students’ names bounce up and down as they logged in and helping a student or two with technical difficulties, Olsen directed members of her class to put on their headphones and listen to a Spanish-language recording of a man and woman laughing and joking as they discussed why Spain’s national anthem has no words. Students also had the option to read a transcript of the dialogue as they listened.

Seated at the end of the back row, senior Gabe Logounov said he likes being able to interact with other students even on the other side of the room – one feature of the lab software allows the teacher to assign students to pairs and groups. Logounov also likes being able to review and re-do recordings of himself speaking Spanish before submitting them to Olsen, he said.

“It kind of broadens our horizons,” said Logounov, who speaks Russian and intends to learn Arabic. He added, “I want to be trilingual – and my goal is to know four languages by the time I’m in college.”

Senior David Fuentes, a native Spanish speaker, said the lab is helping him learn better grammar, spelling and pronunciation, and is expanding his vocabulary.

“It’s an outstanding example of differentiation of instruction. Each student works at their own pace, and if they miss something, they can go back,” Olsen said. “It’s state-of-the-art technology.”

Students also gain confidence as they practice their speaking skills alone rather than in front of the entire class, Olsen said.

“I am thrilled as a teacher,” Olsen said. “It immediately boosts students’ motivation.”

It’s a big difference from the early days of language teaching, said Nocito, who remembers lugging home shoeboxes of cassette tapes with students’ recordings. High on the wall of the new lab hangs a 1982 photo of the high school’s old language lab, showing rows of students divided by partitions.

Now teachers can access those recordings online and listen to them anywhere, Nocito said, and can share lesson plans with each other with the click of a mouse. The days of partitions are past – microphones are advanced enough to block out surrounding noise.

Recently, members of one Mandarin class sang along with a live broadcast of a concert in China, Nocito said.

“To see it in action is just unbelievable,” Nocito said. “We hear from teachers, this is a life-saver, a time-saver, easy to use, awesome.”

The lab will come in handy as Nocito proposes adding AP-level Spanish, French and Italian classes to the high school curriculum and making world language a graduation requirement, he said.

“There’s no question about it: Being bilingual as well as bicultural is a tremendous asset in today’s global economy. Also it breaks down language barriers,” Nocito said. “If you can speak another language, you’re able to appreciate literature, art and music in two languages.”

Superintendent Tony Pierantozzi agreed.

“The World Language Lab allows us to improve our World Language curriculum by providing students with a cutting-edge learning environment and tools that make mastering a world language exciting and fun, utilizing technology to develop skills that are critical in today’s world,” Pierantozzi told the Journal in an email. “We’re excited to be able to offer our students this incredible resource.”

The installation of this multimedia tool was possible thanks to strong support from the Somerville administration, school district and community, according to SHS headmaster John Oteri.

“It’s another example of the community demonstrating their investment in students and furthering their education,” Oteri said.

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