Speaking Their Language

A variety of new technologies are available to teach language more effectively.

BY KEVIN BUTLER

TAPPING INTO TECHNOLOGY FOR foreign language learning is important, given that such learning is increasingly being seen as vital to the nation’s economic and cultural well-being.

The development of technology has dovetailed nicely with a new paradigm of foreign language education, says Marty Abbott, director of education for the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. Rather than having students just learn vocabulary from static textbooks and interact primarily with the teacher, foreign language teachers are attempting to make classes more communication-oriented, participatory, and connected to the real world.

“Teachers are using the new technologies to really open up the classroom for the students to connect more closely with their daily lives and to make learning more relevant,” she says.

The New Language Lab

Probably the most advanced development in foreign-language instruction in the last 15 years is the multimedia-capable language-learning computer lab. This past summer, the Rumson-Fair Haven Regional High School District in Rumson, N.J., unveiled a Sony Virtuoso Language Lab that allows for instructor-guided multimedia and digital student lessons using computers, special software and microphone headsets. Manufactured by the firm SANS, the system offers teachers control over each student operating a computer in the lab, says Michele Salazar-Linden, Rumson-Fair supervisor of world languages. Teachers can upload digital multimedia lessons, communicate with students via text messaging, and listen in on students as they work, interrupting them if necessary to correct them. Students’ vocal input from the headset can be recorded to a computer file that the teacher or student can review later. The system, which connects to the Internet, allows teachers to provide more individualized instruction and allows more time for language practice than a traditional classroom setting. “The student can work for the whole period practicing the language with their partner, and the teacher can work with the students instead...
of lecturing them,” Salazar-Linden says.

Northside College Preparatory High School in the Chicago Public Schools uses another high-tech language lab called reLANpro, purchased from ASC Direct, that has similar capabilities. Using reLANpro, students can review their own recordings as well as practice areas of weakness, says Janet Torres, department chair of world languages at the district. “By having the kids record their answers, they are able to [review them later and] say, this is exactly the one part that was mentioned to me by my teacher that I need to reinforce,” Torres says. For Abbott, the ability to digitally record student performances represents a “radical change” in foreign language instruction, offering more opportunities for assessment and feedback for teachers than just calling on students. “That’s really difficult to do in the confines of the traditional classroom, but the new technologies are really aiding the teacher and making it much more doable for teachers,” she says.

**Videoconferencing**

At Herricks Union Free School District in New Hyde Park, N.Y., Lori Langer de Ramirez, the district’s chair of ESL and world languages, is using video technology to connect students to classes abroad. Using Skype, a computer program that allows telephone calls over the Internet, and a Web camera, de Ramirez has arranged videoconferences with a class of students in Venezuela, allowing her students to experience cultural exchanges. Students were excited and asked a plethora of questions that exercised their vocabulary—for example, inquiring how many siblings a particular Venezuelan student had or asking for another student’s birthdate, de Ramirez recalls.

Videoconferences are exciting and motivating for students, Abbott says. “We often say that a very high motivation for students is when you have an audience for their language production that isn’t just the teacher,” especially an audience of same-age peers in other countries, she adds.

**Blogging**

Many schools are experimenting with communication tools available on the Web to facilitate student discussions and project-based work.

Some Spanish teachers in the Herricks Union district use blogs to foster student discussions of Spanish soap operas, for example, they are assigned to watch, says de Ramirez. For homework, students post comments in Spanish about the soap operas or respond to prompts the teacher posts. When delivered as homework assignments, the blog tasks foster more in-depth responses from students than simple classroom discussions, because students have more time to formulate responses and think through issues, de Ramirez says. Some students post images from the soap opera or YouTube videos of the show on the blog page to demonstrate their responses to questions, such as explaining a character’s role in a particular scene.

**Multimedia**

Project-based learning in the Spanish language is also incorporated into the Herricks Union curriculum by having students create a narrated slideshow presentation of photos they took or found from other sources, de Ramirez says. Students use the free Microsoft software program Photo Story 3, which allows users to...
create a show-and-tell presentation in the target language using computer-connected microphones to record commentaries. Photo Story 3 turns the resulting product into a playable video file. For instance, younger students can take digital pictures of each other acting in poses as part of an assignment to create their own “tele-novela,” de Ramirez says. The students can then use Photo Story 3 to record an audio track of the narration and dialogue of the scenes and create a slideshow.

Researchers are exploring other innovative online learning networks, such as “virtual classrooms” in Second Life, an online social environment in which users can interact with one another by assuming a computer-created character and identity. The U.K.-based company LanguageLab, which operates exclusively in Second Life, is developing courses in Spanish for beginners and already has one for those learning English. For example, using tools in Second Life, LanguageLab built what is called “English City,” where students can have conversations with native speakers by sitting in a restaurant and ordering food together, according to Second Life.

Pen-less Pen Pals

Then there is the new twist on the pen pal. In Theresa Cormier’s French language classroom at Haddam-Killingworth Middle School in Killingworth, Conn., part of Regional School District 17, students don’t need stamps to correspond with pupils in France. Cormier uses ePals (www.epals.com), a free Web site, so students can exchange e-mails and photos with students enrolled in the equivalent of grades 6-9 in Collège Robert Schuman in the small town of Saint-Amarin. Cormier had met the teacher online through a now defunct Web site that connected international educators by e-mail. Cormier’s students write messages in French using the skills they have learned, but they also write a separate message in English for the French students to read, typically focusing on areas like current events, so the students in France can practice their English skills.

The ePals Web site allows Cormier to review messages from the French students before they are sent to her students to ensure they are safe and instructional. Aside from the excitement of corresponding with students of a different culture and continent, the e-mail exchange program has fostered cross-cultural understanding with the French students at the school. “I’ve been teaching for 38 years and it’s the biggest motivator I’ve ever seen in my classroom—that they are writing to actual kids in France,” Cormier says.

E-Pals can also be used to establish “pen pal” relationships between teachers in different countries.

Language Software

With the advent of voice recognition and improved sound, educational software such as the Rosetta Stone line is being used to boost language skills among foreign language students and English language learners. Rosetta Stone is among several
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language-learning software options available on the market, including Auralog’s Tell Me More line and programs manufactured by Berlitz.

The Corona-Norco (Calif.) Unified School District uses Rosetta Stone for its ELL students and at two schools with dual-immersion programs, where English- and Spanish-speakers are taught together beginning in kindergarten, says Bertha Barajas, a teacher on special assignment for the district’s ELL students. As part of supplemental instruction, the Spanish-speaking students in the dual-immersion program use the English Rosetta Stone program, while English speakers use the Spanish version. The students do exercises on the computer “pretty much at their own pace,” though they must answer various test questions correctly before proceeding to the next lesson, she says. ELL students use microphones into which they speak answers, which are then assessed by the computer program for pitch, intonation and other factors. A meter on the screen indicates how well they have pronounced their answers, based on a computer analysis of the children’s vocal output.

Students may feel more comfortable speaking into a computer than they would speaking in front of an entire class, where they may be shy and afraid of making mistakes. “This helps them overcome their fear of speaking,” Barajas says, which tends to be one of the biggest obstacles to language learning.

MP3 Players
When it comes to teaching the MP3 player generation, world language teachers can turn to Apple iPods. Brian Reynolds, a Spanish teacher at North Olmsted High School in the North Olmsted (Ohio) City Schools, uses iPod Nanos in his class for tests and during listening and speaking exercises. Reynolds loads audio CDs provided with the classroom textbooks onto his computer and downloads them to the students’ iPods. Each student can listen to the audio exercises, pausing them or replaying them, which is useful during a test when students can replay a portion of an audio prompt that they didn’t understand. In a class without iPods, the teacher would play the audio prompt over a sound system a couple of times, depriving students of the chance to control the audio sequence. “They claim that it really helps them a lot,” Reynolds says about the use of iPods. “If nothing else, it lowers testing anxiety” by allowing students to feel more in-control of the exam.

The school also purchased special microphones for the iPod Nanos, which allow students to record their voices as they

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