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Learning the lingo via technology

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THIELLS — The dozen students from Karin Preisel's French 2 class sat before individual flat-screen monitors, headphones firmly settled, watching the film "Chocolat" in French with English subtitles.

Last year, they might have been sitting in class with the lights dim and the movie on a single television screen, attentive students trying to see the action from a distance, bored students chatting with friends. Or they might have been responding to teacher questions, waiting for their turn while the teacher drilled a classmate.

"We used to have an overhead projector on the wall so you could see what the teacher was doing on his computer, but you couldn't hear anything well," said Ray Maurissaint, 16, one of Preisel's students. "Here, you can see it up close and not worry about hearing other people's voices when they're not interested in the movie."

North Rockland High School's new \$185,000 language lab with its 30 individual cubicles, computer screens, audio and visual gear, and teacher-directed lessons has given foreign language a boost, district educators said. The lab opened this year, making North Rockland the second of the county's eight public school districts to incorporate a computerized language lab into the foreign-language curriculum.

Within the next month or so, it will be ready for double duty, not only allowing English-speaking students to listen to foreign languages, but allowing the district's nearly 200 non-English speakers to use the system for English drills and practice.

"We knew it would be a good idea to have a couple of (translation) programs on computer and we asked for that last year," said Ronnie Moshi, who teaches English as a second language at North Rockland High School. "They said, 'Why don't we just install it here and start having the kids use it?' They can go at their own pace. It's just another way to get the language."

Making the language lab available to the ESL students just seemed a natural extension of the foreign-language program, several school educators said.

"It's just such an important tool to get the kids speaking and listening," Preisel said. "You get more in one session here than in an entire year" in just a classroom.

For the non-English speakers, the chance to go through exercises slowly, to be able to repeat words and phrases, to hear themselves speak in English and to do so under teacher supervision seemed a perfect match with the lab's purpose, Moshi said.

"It wakes the kids up. It's still English, but it gets their interest. I think it's a great motivational tool," he said. "A lot of the ESL kids aren't computer-literate, so there's an added benefit — it's an introduction to computer literacy."

Nearly three years ago, when Reina Martinez became foreign-language coordinator for North Rockland schools, she began researching language labs for the nearly 790 students enrolled in the upper-level Spanish, French and Italian courses offered in North Rockland High.

One system, already in place at Suffern High School, caught her imagination with its individual learning stations connected to a teacher's central terminal that controlled and monitored student work. Students could record themselves answering questions and replay the session to hear how they sounded.

North Rockland had nothing similar at the time. The 20 foreign-language teachers made do with a handful of tape recorders and compact disc players when they had to quiz students for the oral portions of tests.

That became a nightmare during Regents exams. Classroom listening lessons were given to all the students at one time, and those who had difficulty would have to ask the teacher to repeat the lesson while others sat waiting.

At the same time, teacher training was stressing individual instruction — tailoring the lessons to make sure each student received all the information and support needed to succeed.

A language lab similar to Suffern's made sense, she said, and she requested the district buy one.

Among its advantages: increased time for students to listen to languages, the ability to let students work at their own pace, an encouragement for students to take more than the state-required two years of foreign language, and less time and space needed for the Advanced Placement and Regents foreign-language tests.

For more than a year, the idea stayed only that. There were too many students in the high school to find spare room for a lab; the district also wanted to see if some of the cost could come from grants or other sources.

When the ninth-graders moved to the Fieldstone Academy two years ago, rooms became available. The Board of Cooperative Educational Services and state software grant money provided more than half the funding for the project. In June, North Rockland teachers toured the Suffern High School language lab and began training on equipment similar to what was installed in their building in July. This fall, the language lab opened when school did.

"I love it," Martinez said. "I love being able to individualize the instruction for the students so the students don't feel frustrated, don't have to ask, 'What did he say? I didn't get that.' Just to see their faces — they're connecting the language with the technology."

Eventually, the system will allow teachers interested in learning foreign languages to take lessons after school, and for members of the community to use the lab to work on their own foreign-language skills, Martinez said. Right now, the room is used by each of the high school's 31 foreign-language sections twice a month, with most open periods scheduled.

"It's a lot easier. You get to hear it, and it's easier to talk to the teacher," said Jeff Hirsch, 14, who is in Preisel's French class. "I'm not very good at French, so this is easier for me."

He said he liked the record and playback feature "because a lot of the time you don't know if you are pronouncing stuff right."

Maurissaint agreed. "It gives (the teacher) and us a better way of knowing what we're doing wrong and knowing what we need help with," she said.