

FOR GLASTONBURY PUBLIC SCHOOL STUDENTS, LEARNING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE IS SECOND NATURE.

When grade 1 students at Glastonbury, Connecticut Public Schools learn their ABC's, they also learn them in Spanish. That's because foreign language learning at Glastonbury is not an option but is part of the core curriculum for all students grades 1-12. Although all grade school students begin with Spanish, they can switch to another language in middle or high school. Because these students start learning a second language at such an early age, learning a foreign language is second nature.

As one of the oldest, continuing public 1-12 foreign language programs in the country, Glastonbury has garnered somewhat of a national reputation. In 2007, the Glastonbury school system celebrated their elementary language learning program's 50-year milestone. Today, their program has grown to a staff of 50 language instructors who teach Spanish, French, Russian, Mandarin Chinese, Greek and Latin, in addition to ten ELL teachers and tutors.

The success of Glastonbury's language program may be attributed to their progressive approach, which goes beyond teaching students to learn a foreign language but immerses them in the cultural aspects as well. Rita Oleksak, Director of Foreign Languages and English Language Learning for Glastonbury Public Schools, ACTFL Past President and President of NADSFL explained, "What we have here are fully integrated, culturally based programs that challenge students to ask 'why they are who they are' and 'how they relate to this other culture'. Whether a student is studying a Classic, Asian or Slavic language, for example, he or she must make a natural connection to what's being learned. We make the connections make sense."

These "content enriched" collaborative objectives work across all languages and levels of study, so that students naturally progress in their target language as they move up in grade level.

Teachers integrate the curriculum vertically within each grade level but also horizontally across all grade levels, so that when students are reintroduced to words, it's in an expanded or advanced form. These objectives are accomplished through collaborative teams of language teachers grades 1-12, who follow the district curriculum, which has been mapped electronically using Rubicon Atlas. Professional development is an ongoing instructor objective as well. In their respective language classes, teachers speak only the target language, which not only exercises their own fluency but also challenges the students' comprehension skills and attention levels.

Preparing foreign language students for real life situations.

Teachers at Glastonbury use a mix of both narrative and interpersonal communication, but they believe the latter is more beneficial from a real world perspective. "We find that interpersonal communication is good for the students," said Oleksak. "They can collaborate with teachers and other students...and the conversational skills prepare them for more real life experiences."

Glastonbury teachers give their students more structured, interpersonal communication training in their target language through their SANS digital language lab, which employs the Sony Virtuoso™ and Soloist® digital language learning software in their middle schools and high schools and one of the first Sony digital systems in their grade school. Chester Technical Services (CTS), a SANS authorized reseller, provides the sales support and training.

In elementary school, the lab is used primarily for students to work on oral proficiency. "Students love to talk to each other; it's so developmentally correct for this age," said Bonnie Hoskins, 6th grade Spanish teacher.



A Glastonbury student uses the Sony Soloist Software to record an audio timeline in Spanish.



Jimmy Wildman, Spanish Teacher

"Students love the conversational pairing. They are more uninhibited in the lab – even the shy students will always participate in the lab," she explained.

According to Marta Krzemien, 6th grade Spanish teacher, using the digital language lab, students can listen to music and see the songs in the written language. "Our curriculum is based on a trip to Mexico, for example, so the students learn songs that children in Mexico sing," said Krzemien. "The lab gives them a level of confidence. The kids who are struggling can get more attention without the other kids knowing."

The Sony digital language labs give students more opportunities to practice their interpersonal skills in the target language. "Students are comfortable with computers and headsets," said Meghan Zingle, high school Spanish teacher. "My students love the lab. When I pair them up, they work together and focus on their partner and just the task at hand. Nothing else distracts them."

Using creative tools to engage students in the language lab.

To encourage participation, teachers strive to find new ways to incorporate authentic materials and multimedia content into their lessons, and they explore the features in the Sony software to help them accomplish these goals. Some teachers use the pairing tool, for example, to assign conversational scenarios to students; use the group tool to engage them in debates; or incorporate multimedia to have them watch movie clips and give critiques. "Speaking is the most difficult thing to assess in the classroom," Zingle explained. "The lab helps students with speaking skills and helps teachers in assessing them."

The level of creativity in the lab is limited only by the teacher's expertise with the Sony software. "Some teachers have a comfort zone with just 'record, speak, digitize'," said Lynne LeRoy-Fink, Technical Paraprofessional at Glastonbury High School. "Other teachers push it to the limit and try new things."

One high school Spanish teacher, Jimmy Wildman, continually experiments with the Sony software tools to find new ways to reach and engage his students. "I think the lab provides a break in what we typically do in class...a nice change of pace," said Wildman. "Students practice speaking activities then go back and listen to themselves. It gives them something different to look forward to."

One innovative project his classes are working on is creating a timeline of the history of Spain as a PowerPoint® slide show. What makes this unique is that, in addition to graphic files or pictures, students must also include a sound file for each historical event. Each student is required to come to the lab and use the Sony Soloist software to record in Spanish what happened on a particular date. "This transforms a boring timeline and kicks it up a notch," said Wildman. "Plus by incorporating multimedia, it improves their other technology skills." Once Wildman sets this up and saves it as a lesson, he can share it with other teachers. "I'm hoping to set up some high quality lessons I can brag about," he jokingly added.

Wildman also incorporates other multimedia tools into his lab exercises, such as showing a video clip about the Mayans and then using the "group" function so the class can discuss it; divides the class into two debate teams; or pairs students for role playing or text chatting. "Take a student who is unenthusiastic or uncooperative and pair him or her with a focused student and the result is great. They try hard to keep up," said Wildman.

In addition to making it easier for teachers to assess students' speaking performance, the digital language lab also makes it more convenient. Teachers can save student recordings to a folder on their office PC, save it to their MP3 player or burn it to a CD for evaluating later at home or outside the office.



From left to right: Marta Krzemien, Rita A. Oleksak and Bonnie Hoskins

A 50-year legacy with an (ear) to the future.

With their 50-year legacy in language education, Glastonbury has set the bar for many public schools in the nation. While other programs have only thrived, theirs has expanded and progressed with time.

But of course, when it comes to language learning, Oleksak always has her "ear" to the future. "We need another lab!" stated Oleksak. "And we have just skimmed the surface with the lab we have. There are so many more features we can learn and use."

Oleksak's teaching staff shares her enthusiasm for language learning technology. "When I came here ten years ago, all we had to work with was a tape deck," said Zingle. "To have come this far is amazing." Then with a broad smile, she excused herself as her next class began filing into the lab.